

Triumphs of M. Jonquille

by MELVILLE DAVISSON POST
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seemed impossible for me—to consider this great vital bulk of a man as a monk of one of the oldest religious orders in the world. Every common, academic conception of such a monk he distinctly negated. He impressed me, instead, as possessing the ultimate qualities of clever diplomacy—the subtle ambassador of some new Oriental power, shrewd, suave, accomplished.

When one read the yellow backed court record, the sense of old, obscure, mysterious agencies moving in sinister menace, invisibly around Rodman could not be escaped from. You believed it. Against your reason, against all modern experience of life, you believed it.

There was one man in the world that everybody wished could have been present at the time. That was Monsieur Jonquille. Jonquille was chief of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Service de la Surete in Paris. He had been in charge of the French secret service on the frontier of the Shaa states, and at the time he was in Asia.

Other installment of the unusual mystery story will appear in our next issue.

CHAPTER II

As soon as France could release Jonquille, it sent him. Rodman's was the common property of the world. The American government could not, even with the verdict of a trial court, let Rodman's death go by under the smoke-screen of such a weird, inscrutable mystery.

I was to meet Jonquille and come here with him. But my train into New England was delayed, and when I arrived at the station, I found that Jonquille had gone down to have a look at Rodman's country-house, where the thing had happened.

It was on an isolated forest ridge of the Berkshires, no human soul within a dozen miles of it—a comfortable stone house in the English fashion. There was a big drawing-room across one end of it.

Rodman used this drawing-room for a workshop. He kept it close-shuttered and locked. Not even this big, yellow, servile creature who took exclusive care of him in the house was allowed to enter, except under Rodman's eye. What he saw in the final scenes of the tragedy, he saw looking in through a crack under the door. The earlier things he noticed when he put logs on the fire at dark.

Time is hardly a measure for the activities of the mind. These reflections, winged by in a scarcely perceptible interval of it. They have taken me some time to write out here, but they crowded past while the big Oriental was speaking—in the pause between his words.

"The print," he continued, "was the first confirmatory but it was not the first indicatory sign. I doubt if the Master himself noticed the thing at the beginning."

He paused.

"The Master was sunk in his labor, and while that enveloped him, the first advances of the lure would have gone by unnoticed—"

blade of the knife on the fiber of the tobacco and, of course, clearly the rasp of the match. A moment later I knew that he was in the chair again. The odor of ignited tobacco returned. It was some time before there was another sound in the room; then suddenly I heard the Master swear. His voice was sharp and astonished. This time, Excellency, he got up swiftly and crossed the room to the fireplace. I could hear him distinctly. There was the sound of one tapping on metal, thumping it, as with the fingers.

He stopped again, for a brief moment, as in reflection.

"It was then that the Master unlocked the door and asked for the liquor." He indicated the court record in my pocket. "I brought it, a goblet of brandy with some carbonated water. He drank it all without putting down the glass. . . . His face was strange, Excellency. . . . Then he looked at me.

"Put a log on the fire," he said.

"I went in and added wood to the fire and came out."

"The Master remained in the doorway; he re-entered. When I came out, and closed the door behind him. . . . There was a long silence after that; then I heard the voice, permitted to the devotion, thin, metallic, offering the barter to the Master. It began, and ceased because the Master was on his feet and before the fireplace. I heard him swear again, and presently return to his place by the table."

The big Oriental lifted his face

and looked out at the sweep of the entry before the window. "The thing went on, Excellency, the voice offering its lure, and presenting it in brief flashes of materialization, and the Master endeavoring to seize and detain the visitations, which ceased instantly at his approach to the hearth."

The man paused.

"I knew the Master contended in vain against the thing; if he would acquire possession of what it offered, he must destroy what the creative forces of the spirit had released to him."

Again he paused.

"Toward morning he went out of the house. I could hear him walking on the gravel before the door. He would walk the full length of the house and return. The night was clear; there was a chill in it, and every sound was audible."

"That was all, Excellency. The Master returned a little later and ascended to his bedroom as usual."

Then he added:

"It was when I went in to put wood on the fire that I saw the footprint on the hearth."

There was a force, compelling and vivid, in these meager details, and severe suppression of things, big and tragic. No elaboration could have equaled, in effect, the virtue of this restraint.

The man was going on, directly, with the story.

"The following night, Excellency, the thing happened. The Master had passed the day in the open. He dined with a good appetite, like a man in health. And there was a change in his de-

meaner. He had the aspect of men who are determined to have a thing out at any hazard.

"After his dinner the Master went into the drawing-room and closed the door behind him. He had not entered the room on this day. It had stood locked and close-shuttered."

The big Oriental paused and made a gesture outward with his

finger, as of one dismissing an absurdity.

"No living human being could have been concealed in that room. There is only the bare floor, the Master's table and the fireplace.

The great wood shutters were of the big, amazing truth. But as I have said, he had his fingers on one essential fact.

It was the report of the experts at the trial. They showed by the casting of rust on the bolts that the shutters had not been moved; the walls, ceiling and floor were undisturbed. The throat of the chimney was coated evenly with old soot. Only the door was possible as an entry and this was always locked except when Rodman was himself in the room. And at such times the big Oriental never left his post in the hall before it. That seemed a condition of his mysterious overcare of Rodman.

Everybody thought the trial court went to an excessive care. It scrutinized in minute detail every avenue that could possibly lead to a solution of the mystery. The whole country and every resident was inquisitioned. The conclusion was inevitable. There was no human creature on that forest crest of the Berkshires but Rodman and his servant.

But one can see why the trial judge kept at the thing; he was seeking an explanation consistent with the common experience of mankind. And when he could not find it, he did the only thing he could do. He was wrong, as we now know. But he had a hold in the dark on the truth—not the whole truth by any means; he never had a glimmer of that. He never had the faintest conception

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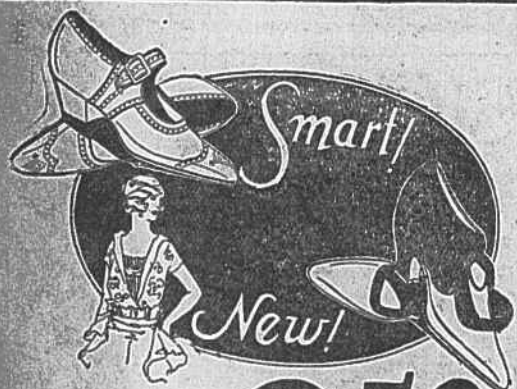
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